AN AVERROIST VISITS PETRARCA

From a letter to Boccaccio. Venice, August 28, 1364. (*Sen.*, V, 2 [3], in *Opera* [Basel, 1554], p. 880; [1581], p. 796.)[1]

I WONDER from where these new theologians sprout up who do not spare the Doctors of the Church. Soon they will not respect the Apostles either, nor the Gospel, and eventually they will let loose their frivolous talk against Christ Himself, unless He whom it must concern comes to our aid and tightens the reins of these untamed animals. By now it has become almost a habit with them to strike out with a silent gesture or even with an impious word whenever these venerable and holy names are pronounced. They say: "Your Augustine saw a lot, but he did not know much." And of others they speak no more respectfully.

Some days ago there was[2] here in my library one of these "religious" men[3] (not the habit alone, but to be Christian is the highest form of religion).[4] He belonged to that sect of men who practice philosophy after the modern fashion and think they are not efficient enough if they do not bark at Christ and His heavenly doctrine. When I happened to mention some passage from the Scriptures—I forget which—he began to foam with rage and a hideous native anger. His face was distorted, and he made an ugly grimace of haughty contempt. "You may

1. [The text is badly corrupted in some sentences in the Basel editions. The corrections indispensable for its restitution are mentioned in the following notes.]

2. [*Fuit*, not *fui* (correct in the Venice editions of 1501 and 1503).]

3. [*Religiosum*, not *religiosius* (Basel) or *religiosus* (Venice, 1501). The sentence is elliptic.]

4. [The unidentified visitor belonged to a religious order. Petrarca wants to say that taking orders does not necessarily raise a man to a higher moral order, but being a true Christian is the highest way of being religious.]

keep your petty Doctors of the Church to yourself," he said. "I know whom to follow and whom to believe."[5]

"You used the words of the Apostle," I replied; "so you had better use his faith too."

"Your Apostle," was his answer, "was 'a word-sower' and 'a madman.' "

"You speak[6] excellently," I said, "my worthy philosopher. The first phrase you used was hurled at him in reproach by other philosophers,[7] and the second was said to him by Festus, the governor of Syria.[8] Indeed, he was a sower of the most useful word. We see before us the abundant harvest of faith that grew up from this seed, when it had been cultivated with the saving plow of his successors and irrigated with the blood of the martyrs."

Here he burst into a disgusted laughter and exclaimed: "Well, you are surely a good Christian. I, for my part, do not believe in such things. Your Paul and Augustine, and all the others you preach and extol, were awfully loquacious fellows. If you could only bear Averroes, you would see how much greater he is than these silly babblers of yours."

I must confess, I flared up, hardly able to keep from slapping him in his impure and blasphemous face: "This is an argument of long standing. I have had such disputes with other heretics too. Be gone and never come back, neither you nor your heresy!" Saying this, I seized him by his coat and pushed him out of my house, more insultingly than my manners, though not his, would have required.....

5. [II Tim. 2:12.]

6. [*Loqueris*, not *sequeris*.]

7. [Acts 17:18. The famous word *seminiverbius* is here rendered according to the Reims-Douai New Testament of 1582.]

8. [Acts 26:24.]

PETRARCA'S AVERSION TO ARAB SCIENCE

From a letter to his physician and friend Giovanni de'Dondi dell'Orologio in Padua. Arquà, November 17, 1370. (*Sen.*, XII, 2, in *Opera* [Basel, 1554], p. 1010; [1581], p. 913.)

BEFORE I close this letter, I implore you to keep these Arabs from giving me advice about my personal condition. Let them stay in exile. I hate the whole lot. I know that the Greeks were once most ingenious and eloquent men. Many very excellent philosophers and poets; outstanding orators and mathematicians have come from Greece. That part of the world has brought forth princes of medicine. You know what kind of physicians the Arabs are. I know what kind of poets they are. Nobody has such winning ways; nobody, also, is more tender and more lacking in vigor, and, to use the right words, meaner and more perverted. The minds of men are inclined to act differently; but, as you used to say, every man radiates his own peculiar mental disposition. To sum up: I will not be persuaded that any good can come from Arabia.....

A REQUEST TO TAKE UP THE FIGHT AGAINST AVERROES

From a letter to Luigi Marsili in Paris (*ca.* 1370). (*Sen.*, XV [XIV], 6 = sine nomine 22, in *Opera* [Basel, 1554: sine titulo XVIII], p. 812; [1581], p. 734.)

FINALLY, this is what I beg you to do. As soon as you have gained the position you are longing for[1]—and I trust this will speedily come to pass—set all your strength and all your nerves to the fight against that frantic dog Averroes, who is prompted by an undescribable fury to bark at his Lord and Master Jesus Christ and the Catholic Faith. For this purpose gather his blasphemies from all sources. You know that I have already begun such a collection. However, I have always been enormously busy, and I am now busier than ever. Lack of time no less than of learning has prevented me from completing the collection. It is a task that has been impiously neglected by many great men. Therefore, do write a little book and dedicate it to me, whether I am then still living or have meanwhile departed. There is always the right moment for every man, and for me too, to think at last of departing. And do not think that your faculties or your stylistic abilities will not be sufficient, though they were lacking in some of your brothers. Christ will aid you while you are doing His work, He who has been at your side since the very hour of your birth.

1. [Marsili seems to have expected promotion to a higher position in his order. Though still a young man, he was evidently already a prominent figure. A few years after Petrarca's death he had become a famous preacher in Florence, where his popularity grew so high that he was twice proposed for appointment as bishop of that diocese and received an honorary tomb in the cathedral when he died in 1394.]